

# **The Ohio State University Autumn Commencement December 14, 2008**

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Members of the Board, President Gee, Provost Alutto and my administrative colleagues, honorees, distinguished faculty, family and friends in the audience and—most importantly—graduates, it is an honor to address you today.

I must begin with a confession. In President Gee's kind introduction you heard that I received my undergraduate degree from Ohio State. That is true. My confession is that I missed my graduation ceremony — not for some good reason like a grave personal emergency. No I just slept through it. Why did that happen, you might ask? The truth is that in those days graduation was on Friday, and we had a tradition on Thursday night before graduation, a tradition of which some of you might be aware because it continues today, at least in the spring, a tradition called "the crawl." The goal of which was to sample the libations in each of the bars on High Street. There were a lot more bars on High Street in those days, and I dutifully hit most of them. I went home, fell asleep, and did not wake up until late afternoon on Friday, long after graduation was over.

I share this not to prove that I was totally irresponsible at 21, but rather to say that shortly after I graduated, I was offered a job at the university, which I accepted. I felt so bad about missing graduation, which is one of the great milestones in university life—an event that goes to the heart of our institutional purpose—that I swore that as long as I worked here I would never miss another graduation ceremony. And I have not. This is the 386<sup>th</sup> commencement of The Ohio State University, and I have been at the last 138, more than one-third of the total ever held. Having heard so many commencement addresses, you would think that writing one would be pretty easy for me. I am here to tell you: It has not been easy.

I have heard a few really memorable commencement speeches (most of which were delivered by Ohio State faculty or administrators) but with these few notable exceptions, I cannot remember most of the 138 I have heard.

I wanted to be among the memorable speakers and say something you will recall tomorrow, next week and when you come back for your 10, 25 and 50 year reunions. So I started thinking about what might make this address relevant to you at this time and in this place. A message

you would carry away with you and remember. I hit upon several approaches.

You all seem to pay at least some attention to pop culture, and who represents pop culture more than Paris Hilton? So what if I did a commencement address in the style of Paris Hilton?

This is probably not the truth, but I've heard that Paris got fed up with people thinking her brain was two cans short of a six-pack and so she decided to take a college level course in logic.

So, hard as it may be, imagine me as a 5'8" too-thin blonde holding a yappy dog named Tinkerbelle, and here is a commencement speech in the style of Paris Hilton after she took a college course in logic.

*Hi.*

*You know, all college graduates are hot.*

*You're (all of you – hi) you are a college graduate*

*Therefore, hi, you are all hot!*

(Deep, whiny sigh.)

This may be true but, once said, there is not too much place to go with the state of your hotness that is appropriate to discuss in this setting.

I decided I needed to go in a different direction.

I asked myself what do we all care about – of course our collective obsession with Michigan came to mind. If I were going to do a commencement address centered around our deep feelings about Michigan, it could only be in the form of a joke – and at that the simplest form of joke. Which, of course, is a knock-knock joke. So here it goes – a commencement address in the form of a knock-knock joke involving Michigan. (You have a part in this so I need to hear you loud and clear.)

Knock, Knock,

*Who's there?*

Michigan

*Michigan Who?*

What did you say?

*Michigan Who?*

Exactly! Isn't that the point? After dominating their little Maize and Blue behinds for over five years, aren't they pretty irrelevant?

Michigan Who? pretty much ends the conversation. It is time to stop obsessing over Michigan. And thus I knew a Michigan theme was not going to carry me very far as a commencement address.

So then I looked to what else was meaningful to you. You send me a lot of e-mails and often include inspirational quotes from famous people at the end. I save these in a special e-file and since they seem to have meaning to you I thought maybe I could string a series of these deep thoughts together and make a pretty decent commencement speech.

Some of you know I do not like to do straight lecture. I like student participation. I often utilize reading and response and so I am going to share a series of quotes, deep thoughts, and ask that you respond. The response each time is the same and comes from the greatest of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, Bobby McFerrin, who implored us to *"Don't Worry, Be Happy."* And that is your response.

So if I started with this deep thought from Albert Einstein, *"Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new,"* you would respond : *Don't Worry, Be Happy.* (Practice: Anyone who has never made a mistake has never tried anything new. *"Don't worry, Be happy"*)

Here we go.

Graduates, this is a special day in your life and we all know *that "As one door closes, another door opens."*

*Don't Worry, Be Happy*

We expect that you will each do great things, because you each have the capacity to *"Be the change you want to see in the world."*

*Don't worry, Be happy.*

Many of you have been involved with environmental issues and I hope one the great things you do after graduation is to continue your concern for the environment, so always remember this deep thought, *"Give a hoot, don't pollute."* And

*Don't worry, Be happy.*

And in conclusion always remember that, *"What lies behind us and what lies before us are small matters compared to what lies within us."*

And so, in the end

*Don't worry, Be Happy.*

Well done, but those are other people's thoughts. As deep as they are, a commencement address in someone else's words would really not be very fulfilling for me or probably not fulfilling for you.

So it came down to maybe I just need to speak from my own heart. What would I say to you as a very last Rich Text or as last parting words for those not familiar with my weekly Rich Text column?

The thought of speaking from my heart actually got me focused not just on my heart but also on your heart. I wonder if we have prepared your heart to take on the world after graduation as well as we have prepared your mind.

I feel pretty confident we have prepared your brain. You would not be here today if you had not mastered the intellectual skills required of an educated person. You have mastered the content of your major field and have also learned a set of generalized intellectual skills that will allow you to use that knowledge.

- I am confident that you can critically analyze a complex data set or deconstruct a piece of literature.
- I am confident that you can appreciate and understand multiple points of view on a single topic.
- I am confident that you can abstract general principles from specific cases.
- And I am confident that you can solve problems in both linear and more creative modes.

So I feel pretty comfortable that your brain is in a good place.

But what about your heart? Have you developed the skills necessary to balance all this intellectual power, all this brain power you now possess, with "Heart"?

Graduates do this for me. (Audience you can do this too.)

Tap your head -- tap, tap, tap -- hard, right?  
Now pat your heart -- hmmm, soft?

Hard, Soft. Soft, Hard. There is probably a reason for this difference. In this life, the soft gentleness of the heart balances the cold logic of the brain. This may be obvious, but I believe it is not an accident. I believe it is meant to be this way.

On numerous occasions you have experienced conflicts between your head and your heart -- between logic and feeling:

- Should I stay in and study or go out and party with my friends?
- Should I remain in a relationship, even though I suspect it is not going anywhere, or cut it off now and move on?
- Should I tell my mom about something bad I did or let her revel in her belief in my inherent innocence?
- Should I say something to my roommates about their annoying habits or let it go for the sake of harmony?

The list goes on. We find our head and our heart often at odds. What are the skills of the heart that may help resolve these and so many other conflicts? What skills of the heart will help us make the very best decisions in life?

I am not going to lecture on emotional intelligence. You can search the internet if you are not familiar with EI concepts. Scholarly work on connecting emotion and values to logic and decision making is readily available. Just Google it.

I am going to take a much simpler approach today and talk about two skills of the heart that I hope you have and will continue to develop.

The first of those heart skills is passion.

I want your heart to be filled, to ooze, to run over, to overflow with passion. And I hope that as you graduate we have instilled in you a great passion for a whole range of things.

First, I hope you are passionate about ideas and learning. I feel relatively confident that the PhD candidates have found their passion -- found the thing you want to not only think but also feel about every day for the rest of your life. Master's students are getting closer to finding your life's calling. Undergrads, some of you have found your passion, but I know many of you are still searching; this is OK. It is a process that takes time and significant life experience and it may take a few more years for you to find the thing that will be your life-long passion.

Some of you have experienced the unofficial phenomenon called Jump in the Lake. I want you to recall the incredible joy you felt running down to the lake. (Or if you have not done the Jump, think about some other event in your life that was accompanied by pure joy -- the day you successfully defended your thesis or dissertation, the birth of your child, if you have one.) For those of you that did jump, I have been there and, forgetting for the moment that some of that excitement I saw is fueled

by liquid refreshment, I have witnessed first hand that you are capable of feeling in your heart just an outrageous amount of passion and joy. If you can recall that joy or another moment when you were just boiling over with excitement and happiness and love, my wish for you, my challenge to you, is that you seek to live every moment of every day with that level of enthusiasm and happiness. Every moment is the "Jump".

And, if you find you do not have joy, that you do not love what you are doing, have the courage to make a change and follow the things about which you are passionate.

Find and follow your passion.

The second kind of passion I want to talk about is the passion for another person. If you have not found them already, I do believe there is someone out there meant to spend their life with you and you with them -- someone who is a best friend, (and that may be where it ends) or, at a higher level, a partner or a spouse.

Deep, deep friendship or true romantic love not only connects you to another human being, it also helps you come to understand who you are, what really matters to you, what you value, and what the capacity of your heart truly is. Love will temper your harsher emotions and help your heart be the guide to your brain as you make every important life decision.

My friends, in your life, love passionately!

The third kind of passion I hope we have instilled in you is a great passion for your university. Archie Griffin will talk about this later so I am not going to say very much now other than, as you graduate, I hope you do so with a deep affection and love for your Ohio State! Carry the Buckeye spirit in your heart where ever life's journey takes you.

If the first skill of the heart is passion, its twin and the second skill is compassion.

This is an area where I know you have done some tremendous work in developing your heart. Many of you have spent countless hours in community service and service-learning activities – giving back to others, bettering our communities here and abroad. We applaud and thank you for so generously sharing your heart.

Many of you have also demonstrated tremendous compassion right here on campus. You have done this through thousands of small acts of caring and kindness:

- consoling a friend who did not do as well as they would have liked on a test,
- or spending hours helping a classmate recover lost computer data,
- or comforting a friend who had lost a loved one, or
- looking after someone who had over-
- indulged and was spending most of the night with their head in a wastebasket or worse.

You have demonstrated compassion in your daily life here.

I believe you must carry this kind of commitment and all of the thousands of good, and caring, and loving deeds still inside of you out into the world. There is so much that needs to be done; the world needs your compassion.

I am sure you are familiar with the saying, “To whom much is given much is expected.” You have been given a lot. I am not talking about our giving you a degree – you earned your degree. I am talking about your having been given the opportunity to earn a degree.

Since you have been surrounded by folks working on degrees all of your time in school, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that most everyone, everywhere has a college education. This is just not the case. The latest data I have shows that in this country only about 17% of people have a bachelor’s degree, leaving 83%, a huge majority, who do not. Only about 10% of people in this country have a graduate degree. Think about that. No matter where you started in life, at both the bachelor’s and graduate level, when you leave here today you are joining the intellectual elite in this country.

Please never forget that education and all the opportunities it provides is a gift. And because you have this gift, much will be expected of you.

My sincerest desire is that you continue to learn both in your head and in your heart about the human condition. That you find an issue or two – be it hunger, homelessness, disease, peace, education, or any of dozens of others that stir your heart--and use that caring to apply all your brain power to finding lasting solutions to these human problems. I hope you will use your heart to reach out and touch humanity. Embrace other people.

In fact, let's do it now – hug someone next to you. (Audience too, if you are inclined. You are all one Ohio State family now and so all related to each other.)

That may have felt a little silly, but I suspect it also felt good. One of the wonderful side benefits of our engaging others is that it makes us feel good. It makes our hearts glow. You know this is true from your community service work and from caring for your friends during college. You know that caring has changed, even transformed, your life.

As you graduate, continue to connect with people in your own community. Connect with people across this country. Connect with people around the world. Developing compassion and serving others are not choices; they are obligations arising from this incredible gift you leave here today possessing -- a college education.

Compassion is an essential skill of the heart.

So there you have it. My last Rich Text. My last words of advice and encouragement.

And so what are the take-aways from today?

First: As you engage in the process of learning throughout the rest of your life, focus on developing both your mind AND your heart.

- Use your heart and the values imbedded in it to inform and guide your intellect.
- Develop and demonstrate passion and compassion, remembering always that much is expected of you.
- In short, continue to expand the capacity of your heart.

The second take-away is that Bobby McFerrin was not a shallow and mindless songwriter. He was on to something when he taught us, "Don't worry, be happy." You deserve happiness. Happiness is a good thing. Don't blame other people or circumstances if you are not happy. You are in charge of your life, including your happiness; and so the second take-away is: follow your heart and you will be happy.

Third, stop obsessing over things that are irrelevant. Michigan who? Need I say more?

Fourth and finally, in a few minutes you will be an Ohio State graduate. Many of you have heard me tell my "buckeye" story over the years and so you will understand what I mean when I say you are Buckeyes and so you are a bunch of killer nuts; and in addition, as Buckeyes each and everyone of you is so hot!



Graduates:

- Grow your heart!
- Follow your heart!
- Focus your heart!
- Be a Buckeye forever at heart!

My dear students, it has been a pleasure serving you during your years at Ohio State. Please know that I am proud of you, and that your university is proud of you.

I have every confidence that you will be incredibly successful and happy in life and that you will, in fact, follow your heart and do great things to make this world a better place.

Thank you and as always, Go Bucks!